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ON PAGE 24

NEW YORK TIMES
17 March, 1985

Ethiopia Denies Forced Resettlement Reports

By CLIFFORD D. MAY
Special to The New York Times

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia, March 16
— A senior Ethiopian Government official says reports about forced resettlement of famine victims are either misunderstandings or the work of the Central Intelligence Agency and other foreign agents who he says have "intentionally spread false propaganda."

Representatives of at least five non-Government relief agencies working in Ethiopia have told Kurt Jansson, the United Nations Assistant Secretary General who is in charge of emergency operations here, of instances in which they say they or members of their

staffs have watched famine victims being recruited by coercive measures for the resettlement program.

Under that plan up to 1.5 million people are to be moved this year from northern areas afflicted by drought, famine and civil strife to more fertile areas in the south and southwest. Critics of the plan charge that it is designed to remove support from northern regions where there is substantial rebel activity.

Aid workers have charged that Government officials recruiting settlers have on occasion withheld or denied relief organizations permission to distribute food and blankets, physically threatened famine victims and, in one

case in the city of Adigrat in Tigre region early this month, shot to death four people who refused to board a truck bound for a resettlement camp.

In other instances, the relief officials say, families have been separated and seriously ill refugees, as well as pregnant and nursing women, have been forced to board resettlement trucks.

One of the chief rebel groups is the Tigre People's Liberation Front, which is seeking greater autonomy for the Tigre region and the overthrow of Lieut. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam's pro-Soviet Government. The rebel group is allied with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, which has been fighting for the independence of Eri-

trea, a former Italian colony on the Red Sea.

The relief officials who discussed the charges, many of whom have also spoken with Western diplomats and journalists, have asked not to be named, saying that they fear that such identification could lead to their expulsion or to the expulsion of their organizations from the country.

Last week Mr. Jansson conveyed their testimony to Berhanu Bayeh, the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs and a member of the Ethiopian Politburo, who is believed to be one of the top five figures in the Government. Mr. Jansson "expressed his deep concern" about the reports, a spokesman for his office said.

At a meeting with Western reporters Thursday Mr. Berhanu said he had investigated the allegations given to him

by Mr. Jansson and found them all to be false. Some of the reports, Mr. Berhanu said, could be the result of "misunderstanding and misinterpretation of some incidents."

He said relief workers "might have seen the security forces engaged in some other activity like, for example, trying to insure the security of the people in the shelter, to insure that the shelters are not infiltrated by terrorists."

Mr. Berhanu said some of the allegations had probably been fabricated to damage the image of the Ethiopian Government. "We don't know how many C.I.A. agents have infiltrated us, or how many other foreign agents or intelligence agencies have infiltrated us," he said. "Such rumors, such propaganda, are to be expected."

A senior European diplomat said privately earlier this week that "the evidence is now overwhelming that forced resettlement is taking place." He said he did not believe it was the policy of the central Government to resettle people against their will. Instead, he said, local Government officials may be "far more worried" about meeting assigned recruitment targets or quotas than about infringing on famine victims' rights.

"The early settlers, I suspect, went voluntarily," the diplomat said. "But as time goes on it obviously becomes more difficult to find people who want to go. If a local official fails to find volunteers, however, that may be seen as a failure of his own efforts."